



The Wasted Vote Thesis: West German Evidence

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The Wasted Vote Thesis

West German Evidence

Stephen L. Fisher

One reason often put forward for the lack of minor-party success in single-member district/plurality electoral systems is that voters hesitate to waste their support on political parties that have little chance of winning. On this basis, a voter may cast his ballot for one of the major parties even though he prefers a certain minor party. A good illustration of this line of thought is provided by Anthony Downs in his work, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*.¹ Downs claims that in the American presidential election of 1948 some of the voters who preferred Henry Wallace and his Progressive party nevertheless voted for the Democratic candidate. They did so, says Downs, because they felt that Wallace had no chance at all, and that the more people who voted for him, the fewer who would vote Democratic. If the Democratic vote fell low enough, then the Republicans—the least desirable party from the Progressive viewpoint—would win. In sum, Downs argues that a vote for Wallace increased the probability that the party the Progressives favored least would win; and, to avoid this, some Wallace supporters voted for the candidate ranking second in their preference ordering.²

The best known proponent of this “wasted vote” thesis is Maurice Duverger. According to Duverger, “in cases where there are three parties operating under the simple-majority, single-ballot system, the electors soon realize that their votes are wasted if they continue to give them to the third party; whence their natural tendency to transfer their vote to the less evil of its two adversaries in order to prevent the success of the greater evil.”³

¹ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York, 1957).

² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³ He refers to this effect as the “psychological factor.” See Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties*, trans. Barbara and Robert North (New York, 1963), p. 226. Among other scholars who adhere to this doctrine are Hugh Bone, *American Politics and the Party System*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1965), p. 107; Judson L. James, *American Political Parties: Potential and Performance* (New York, 1969), p. 51; E. E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York, 1942), p. 82; and Allen Potter, “Great Britain,” in Robert Dahl, ed. *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies* (New Haven, 1966), p. 11.

The wasted vote concept is very logical and it is widely accepted. It is substantiated, however, by very little concrete evidence and it has come under increasing criticism. One of its most recent critics was W. Phillips Shively.⁴ To test for the presence of the "wasted vote" or "psychological" factor, Shively examined electoral changes in Great Britain from 1892 to 1966, under a single-member district/plurality electoral system; in Germany from 1871 to 1912, under a single-member district runoff system; and in Germany from 1920 to 1933, under a proportional representation system. He hypothesized that the psychological factor, if it was operative to any significant degree, should have been present under the British electoral system, but not under either of the German systems. On the basis of his analysis, Shively concluded that the psychological factor could not be used as an explanation of party strengths in Great Britain or Germany.⁵

As a result of Shively's findings, the wasted vote concept needs to be reconsidered. In the process of reconsideration, note should be taken of the West German case, which provides evidence that this concept might have some validity.

The electoral system of the Federal Republic of Germany is a dualistic one which combines single-member constituencies with proportional representation.⁶ Under this system each voter casts two votes: one for a district candidate (a party may nominate a candidate in each district), the other for a list of candidates (each party may submit its own list of candidates for an entire state). One-half of the Bundestag is made up of the victorious district candidates who are elected in single-member districts by plurality vote; the other half is composed from the state lists in such a way that the overall composition of the Bundestag reflects the strength of the second (list) vote in proportion to the strength of the different parties. In other words, the electoral system functions as a system of proportional representation because the party (list) vote is used to allot proportionately the total number of seats a party receives in a given state. Victories in the single-member districts are then subtracted from this total when the mandates are distributed. Because of the fear that this electoral system could lead to a proliferation of small parties,

⁴ W. Phillips Shively, "The Elusive 'Psychological Factor': A Test for the Impact of Electoral Systems on Voters' Behavior," *Comparative Politics*, III (October 1970), 115-25. Other scholars who are critical of this doctrine are John Grumm, "Theories of Electoral Systems," *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, II (November 1958), 357-76; and Douglas Rae, *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws* (New Haven, 1967), p. 83.

⁵ Shively, pp. 123-25.

⁶ For a discussion of the West German electoral system, see Uwe Kitzinger, *German Electoral Politics* (London, 1960), pp. 17-37; and David Conradt, "Electoral Law Politics in West Germany," *Political Studies*, XVIII (September 1970), 343-45.

the West German lawmakers added a limiting clause to the electoral law which states that no party can obtain seats in the Bundestag unless it either (1) wins seats in three single-member districts, or (2) gains at least 5 percent of the overall list vote.

The Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) dominate the party system in the Federal Republic. Since 1961, the Free Democratic Party (FDP) has been the only other party to win seats in the Bundestag. The FDP won its Bundestag representation by gaining more than 5 percent of the list vote, because all single-member district seats since 1961 have been won by the CDU/CSU and the SPD.

The dualistic nature of the West German electoral system and its dominance by two major parties provide an excellent opportunity to examine the wasted vote concept. The West German voter casts a ballot for a candidate in a single-member district (*Erststimme*) and at the same time for a party list (*Zweitstimme*). In their article on the 1961 Bundestag election, Samuel Barnes, Frank Grace, James Pollock, and Peter Sperlich pointed out that, in all the states in that election, the CDU/CSU and the SPD received fewer and the small parties received more *Zweitstimmen* than *Erststimmen*.⁷ They noted that, in general, this had been true in past national elections. My own research, as illustrated in Table 1, reveals that this phenomenon also occurred in the 1965 and 1969 Bundestag elections. As noted by Barnes and his colleagues, a reasonable explanation for this would be that at least some supporters of the small parties view the election chances of their direct candidate as slight. To choose a small-party candidate in the single-member district contest is to throw one's vote away. It would be more logical to vote for the major-party candidate most closely aligned with one's political preferences. However, to vote for the list (*Zweitstimme*) of a small party is an entirely different matter because all the votes a party wins in a state are combined, and the party receives a proportional share of the Bundestag seats if it wins at least 5 percent of the total vote. Thus, every *Zweitstimme* counts.⁸

The data in Tables 2, 3, and 4 reinforce this line of reasoning. These tables also show clearly that in all three of the national elections the smaller parties received fewer *Erststimmen* than *Zweitstimmen*, while the major parties received fewer *Zweitstimmen* than *Erststimmen*. For example, in the 1969 election, 38 percent of the FDP's list voters deserted the party in the single-member district contests. More importantly, these tables provide information as to how those voters who

⁷ Samuel Barnes et al., "The German Party System and the 1961 Federal Election," *American Political Science Review*, LVI (December 1962), 909–10.

⁸ Ibid.

Table 1 Loss or Gain in *Zweistimmen* as Compared to *Erststimmen* (in Percentages) in 1961, 1965, and 1969 Bundestag Elections *

Party	Schleswig-Holstein		Hamburg		Lower Saxony		Bremen		North Rhine-Westphalia		Hesse		Rhine-land Palatinate		Baden-Wuerttemberg		The Saar		Federal Republic	
	%		%		%		%		%		%		%		%		%		%	
1961																				
CDU/CSU	-1.7	-0.5	-1.1	-0.6	-0.5	-0.9	-0.5	-0.9	-0.5	-0.5	-0.8	-0.3	-0.5	-0.5	-0.3	-0.3	-0.6	-0.3	-0.6
SPD	-0.1	-0.3	-0.2	-0.4	-0.3	-0.4	-0.3	-0.4	-0.3	-0.4	-0.2	-0.1	-0.3	-0.3	-0.2	-0.1	-0.3	-0.1	-0.3
FDP	+1.3	+0.6	+1.3	+0.6	+0.7	+0.8	+0.4	+0.8	+0.4	+0.3	+0.6	+0.2	+0.4	+0.3	+0.6	+0.2	+0.7	+0.2	+0.7
GDP	+0.3	+0.1	-0.2	+0.2	+0.1	+0.2	+0.1	+0.2	+0.1	+0.2	+0.1	**	+0.1	+0.2	+0.1	+	+0.1	+	+0.1
DFU	+0.1	+0.1	+0.1	+0.2	+0.1	+0.2	+0.1	+0.2	+0.1	+0.2	+0.1	+	+	+0.2	+0.1	+0.1	+	+0.1	+
1965																				
CDU/CSU	-2.6	-0.7	-1.8	-0.9	-1.1	-1.1	-0.8	-1.1	-0.8	-1.0	-1.2	-1.2	-0.8	-1.0	-0.8	-1.2	-1.2	-1.2	-1.2
SPD	-0.4	-1.3	-0.7	-1.1	-0.7	-1.2	-1.0	-1.2	-1.0	-0.9	-0.8	-0.2	-1.0	-0.9	-0.8	-0.2	-0.8	-0.2	-0.8
FDP	+2.5	+1.6	+2.0	+1.3	+1.4	+1.6	+1.3	+1.6	+1.3	+1.5	+1.6	+1.2	+1.3	+1.5	+1.6	+1.2	+1.6	+1.2	+1.6
NPD	+0.4	+0.2	+0.3	+0.2	+0.1	+0.3	+0.3	+0.3	+0.3	+0.3	+0.3	+0.1	+0.3	+0.3	+0.3	+0.1	+0.2	+0.1	+0.2
DFU	+0.1	+0.2	+0.1	+0.2	+0.1	+0.2	+0.1	+0.2	+0.1	+0.2	+0.2	+	+0.1	+0.2	+0.2	+0.1	+	+0.1	+
1969																				
CDU/CSU	-1.1	+0.2	-0.3	-0.4	-0.8	-0.4	-0.6	-0.4	-0.6	-0.4	-0.1	-0.6	-0.6	-0.4	-0.1	-0.6	-0.5	-0.6	-0.5
SPD	-1.0	-3.2	-1.5	-1.4	-0.9	-1.4	-0.9	-1.4	-0.9	-1.4	-1.3	-1.5	-1.1	-1.4	-1.3	-1.5	-1.3	-1.5	-1.3
FDP	+1.2	+2.4	+0.9	+1.4	+1.1	+1.2	+1.0	+1.2	+1.0	+0.8	+0.7	+1.0	+1.2	+0.8	+0.7	+1.0	+1.0	+1.0	+1.0
NPD	+0.7	+0.6	+0.8	+0.4	+0.6	+0.8	+0.7	+0.8	+0.7	+0.7	+0.8	+0.8	+0.7	+0.7	+0.8	+0.8	+0.7	+0.8	+0.7

SOURCE: Statistisches Bundesamt, *Wahl zum 4. Deutschen Bundestag am 17. September 1961*, V (Wiesbaden, 1964), p. 18; and Statistisches Bundesamt, *Wahl zum 6. Deutschen Bundestag am 28. September 1969*, V (Wiesbaden, 1969), pp. 4-5.

* All parties which received at least 1.0 percent of the total vote are included in this table.

** Less than 0.1 percent.

Table 2 Number of Voters per 1,000 Casting *Erststimme* and/or *Zweitstimme* for Different Parties or Invalidly, 1961 *

Party	CDU/ CSU	SPD	FDP	GDP	DFU	Other Parties	Invalid Votes	Total
<i>Erststimmen</i> =1000								
CDU/CSU	929	11	22	5	1	1	31	1000
SPD	13	937	11	3	3	1	34	1000
FDP	40	18	899	4	2	3	33	1000
GDP	53	23	23	862	2	5	32	1000
DFU	13	24	7	3	901	6	46	1000
Other parties . .	29	23	23	13	7	863	41	1000
Invalid votes . .	277	240	66	19	22	19	356	1000
<i>Zweitstimmen</i> =1000								
CDU/CSU	956	10	11	3	1	1	19	1000
SPD	15	955	6	2	1	1	20	1000
FDP	81	31	865	5	1	2	16	1000
GDP	79	33	18	844	2	4	20	1000
DFU	20	51	15	4	870	4	36	1000
Other parties . .	48	34	34	13	10	806	54	1000
Invalid votes . .	325	284	94	21	19	9	248	1000

SOURCE: Statistisches Bundesamt, *Wahl zum 4. Deutschen Bundestag am 17. September 1961*, IV (Wiesbaden, 1964), p. 81.
* Absentee ballots are not included.

Table 3 Percentage of Voters Casting *Erststimme* and/or *Zweitstimme* for Different Parties or Invalidly, 1965 *

Party	CDU/ CSU	SPD	FDP	NPD	DFU	Other Parties	Invalid Votes
<i>Erststimmen</i> =100							
CDU/CSU . . .	91.9	1.8	4.1	0.4	0.1	0.1	1.6
SPD	2.7	93.6	1.6	0.3	0.4	0.1	1.4
FDP	8.7	3.3	85.2	0.9	0.4	0.2	1.3
NPD	4.4	2.7	2.5	88.1	0.4	0.5	1.4
DFU	2.9	5.4	2.0	0.8	86.7	0.6	1.8
Other parties..	8.9	7.3	4.2	3.0	1.7	69.9	5.0
Invalid votes..	31.6	26.0	4.0	1.1	1.1	0.9	35.3

(Table cont. on p. 298)

(Table 3 Cont.)

<i>Zweitstimmen</i> =100							
CDU/CSU ...	93.9	2.3	1.4	0.2	0.1	0.0	2.1
SPD	2.2	94.7	0.6	0.1	0.2	0.0	2.1
FDP	20.9	6.7	70.3	0.5	0.2	0.1	1.4
NPD	10.3	5.5	3.7	77.9	0.5	0.3	1.8
DFU	3.0	13.5	2.1	0.5	77.9	0.3	2.7
Other parties..	13.0	8.8	6.5	3.3	2.6	54.5	11.4
Invalid votes ..	29.0	21.5	3.9	0.9	0.8	0.4	43.5

SOURCE: Statistisches Bundesamt, *Wahl zum 5. Deutschen Bundestag am 19. September 1965*, IX (Wiesbaden, 1967), p. 46.

* Absentee ballots are not included.

Table 4 Percentage of Voters Casting *Erststimme* and/or *Zweitstimme* for Different Parties or Invalidly, 1969 *

Party	CDU/ CSU	SPD	FDP	Other Parties	Includ- ing the NPD	Invalid Votes
<i>Erststimmen</i> =100						
CDU/CSU	93.3	2.9	1.3	1.6	1.2	1.0
SPD	3.3	91.8	3.2	0.9	0.5	0.8
FDP	10.2	12.8	72.7	3.3	2.2	1.0
Other parties	6.8	4.4	1.5	86.2	72.1	1.1
Including the NPD....	4.3	1.7	0.8	92.3	91.6	0.9
Invalid votes	30.0	26.3	3.0	7.7	4.5	33.1
<i>Zweitstimmen</i> =100						
CDU/CSU	93.4	3.1	1.1	0.7	0.3	1.7
SPD	3.1	93.4	1.4	0.5	0.1	1.6
FDP	10.6	24.8	62.0	1.3	0.6	1.4
Other parties	13.1	7.0	2.9	73.4	61.2	3.6
Including the NPD....	12.7	5.0	2.4	77.2	76.3	2.7
Invalid votes	25.5	19.4	2.7	2.9	1.9	49.5

SOURCE: Statistisches Bundesamt, *Wahl zum 6. Deutschen Bundestag am 28. September 1969*, VIII (Wiesbaden, 1971), p. 24.

* Absentee ballots not included.

deserted their particular small party in the single-member districts cast their *Erststimmen*. For the 1961 and 1965 elections, the FDP, NPD, and GDP can be classified as essentially bourgeois parties and the DFU

as a leftist party. If the wasted vote concept is valid, then most of the *Erststimmen* of the FDP, NPD, and the GDP voters should have gone to the bourgeois CDU/CSU, while most of the *Erststimmen* of the DFU voters should have gone to the more reform-oriented SPD.

As illustrated in Tables 2 and 3, this is exactly what occurred. For example, in the 1965 election, of the 29.7 percent who voted for the party lists of the FDP but deserted the party in the single-member contests, 20.9 percent cast their *Erststimmen* for the CDU/CSU. In the case of the DFU, of the 22.1 percent who deserted, 13.5 percent cast their *Erststimmen* for the SPD. In the 1969 election, the FDP had changed its image and was seen as a left-oriented liberal party. Of the 38 percent who voted for an FDP party list but deserted on the *Erststimme*, 24.8 percent voted for leftist SPD candidates. The NPD in 1969 was still viewed as a party of the Right and 12.7 percent of its defectors (23.7 percent) cast their *Erststimmen* for the CDU/CSU.

The data in these tables appear to show that smaller parties find it very difficult to offset completely the idea that to vote for a minor party is to throw one's vote away. One could argue that the difference between *Erststimmen* and *Zweitstimmen* is often small and therefore not significant. This would be a convincing argument were it not for the great regularity of large-party *Zweitstimmen* loss and small-party *Zweitstimmen* gain. The differences between the two votes are persistent and therefore important. The regularity of these differences also makes unconvincing the argument that the situation illustrated in the tables is a result simply of the attractiveness of some candidates who, by their personal appeal, are able to win support among the followers of other parties. As Barnes and his colleagues point out, it is hardly likely that only the two larger parties ever have attractive candidates.⁹

The West German evidence alone is not conclusive enough to disprove entirely the argument advanced by some scholars that the wasted vote thesis is not a significant factor affecting electoral change. However, there is enough evidence to warrant careful reconsideration and refinement of the wasted vote concept in future analyses of the forces deterring small-party success.

⁹ Ibid, 910.